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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 000715

SIPDIS

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STATE FOR SCA/CEN, EEB, IO

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/19/2017

TAGS: PGOV PREL EPET ENRG IR TU TX

SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: FM MEREDOV DENIES REPORTS OF GAS SALES TO TURKEY VIA IRAN

REF: A. STATE 99411

¶B. ANKARA 1809

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Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. Ambassador Richard E. Hoagland for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Turkmenistan's Deputy Chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers and Foreign Minister Rashit Meredov firmly denied reports that Turkmenistan plans to sell natural gas via Iran to Turkey and onward to Europe. He said, &Our relationship with the United States is very important. We would never do something like this without prior consultation with you.⁸ While his denial seemed categorical, unanswered questions remain. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) Charge d'affaires met with Foreign Minister Meredov on July 19, just after he had returned with President Berdimuhamedov from a state visit to China, and delivered talking points in reftel A.

¶3. (C) Looking taken aback at first, then distinctly amused, Meredov flatly denied Turkmenistan plans to supply natural gas to Europe via Iran. He said he had noticed the same press reports about such a preliminary agreement that had probably stimulated this demarche, but the Charge should know press reports are not always reliable sources. Charge assured Meredov our sources were not press reports (REF B),

and that we take this information very seriously.

¶4. (C) Meredov insisted, &How can there be such an alleged agreement when there have been no official meetings or even official consultations with the supplier, us? We would never make such an arrangement without extensive official consultation.⁸ (NOTE: Presumably with Iranian and Turkish officials. END NOTE.)

¶5. (SBU) In response to the points about UN Security Council resolutions, Meredov noted Turkmenistan is a member of the UN and takes its international responsibilities with utmost seriousness.

¶6. (C) &At the same time,⁸ he said, &Iran is our neighbor. We share a 1,500 km border. We share a common history. Iranians are our ancestors. We have to have normal, good relations with such a neighbor.⁸ Charge assured Meredov the United States understands Turkmenistan's need for normal relations with such a neighbor.

¶7. (C) Summing up, Meredov said: &Understand one thing. We are an independent and sovereign state that independently establishes its policies in all areas, including energy. We will decide for ourselves to and through which countries we will sell our gas.⁸ Meredov said he would study the demarche points closely, which Charge left as a non-paper in English and Russian.

¶8. (C) Following the meeting with Meredov, Americas Desk Director Serdar Bashimov pulled the Charge aside to emphasize Meredov was telling the truth. He said, &Turkmenistan's new relationship with the United States is too important to jeopardize with a significant issue like this.⁸

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¶9. (C) COMMENT: While Meredov seemed sincere and restated his points several times, several anomalies remain. We note, first, his emphasis at least twice that our sources must be erroneous or fabricated press reports, even though we repeatedly made clear our sources were Turkish government and Turkish energy industry officials. Second, Turkmenistan always emphasizes its policy of selling its gas at its border, and what happens to it after that is not its business. Third, according to recent press reports, Turkmenistan may double its natural gas exports to Iran this year. This meeting with Meredov may not be our last conversation on this issue. END COMMENT.

HOAGLAND